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ABSTRACT

There is considerable debate regarding the effects of childhood sexual abuse on an individual's subsequent adjustment. To determine which variables are most useful in predicting subsequent adjustment of individuals who were involved in sexual experiences as children or adolescents, 59 female and 17 male undergraduates who reported having had a childhood sexual experience were compared to 76 undergraduates who reported no such experience. Comparison subjects were matched for age, sex, race, marital status, socioeconomic status, and religion. Subjects completed self-report measures assessing psychological, social/interpersonal, and sexual adjustment. A revised learned helplessness model served as the basis for examining individuals' cognitive interpretations of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences. The results of a discriminant analysis revealed four variables which contributed to discriminating good from poor adjustment. These variables, in order of importance, were: (1) whether the individual made stable or unstable attributions about the causes of the experience; (2) whether there was a single or multiple perpetrators; (3) whether the child was male or female; and (4) the amount of force in the experience. In general, individuals were more likely to be poorly adjusted if they made stable attributions regarding their experiences, had experience with multiple perpetrators, were male, and had experienced a greater amount of force in the incident. (NRB)

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Childhood and/or Adolescent Sexual Experiences: Predicting Variability in Subsequent Adjustment

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Childhood and/or Adolescent Sexual Experiences: Predicting Variability in Subsequent Adjustment

Childhood sexual abuse has received increasing attention in recent years by the media and in the literature of a variety of professions (e.g., law enforcement, social work, and psychology). Several factors have been suggested to account for this increased interest including a growing awareness of the true magnitude and nature of the problem, and the promotion of it by the child welfare and women's movements as a social problem (Finkelhor, 1982).

As was noted in a recent critique of the literature (Conte, 1984), there is considerable debate regarding the sequelae of childhood sexual abuse with various studies finding different types and degrees of subsequent adjustment difficulties. In part, the contradictory results reported by the available studies are due to methodological problems which include the use of unstandardized outcome measures and imprecise criteria of adjustment (Mrazek & Mrazek, 1981). The variability of results may also be due to a variety of mediating variables which include characteristics of the child and/or adolescent, aspects of the sexual experience (e.g., the degree of relationship between victim and perpetrator), and the individual's cognitions regarding the experience.

A number of studies have begun to appear which attempt to identify the variables associated with differential effects of sexual victimization (e.g., Courtois, 1979; Finkelhor, 1979; Tsai, Feldman-Summers, & Edgar, 1979). As is the case for the literature concerning the nature and magnitude of the sequelae, contradictory results have been found across studies attempting to determine what variables may account for these differential effects.

The present study was undertaken in an effort to expand the available knowledge regarding mediating variables associated with differential subsequent adjustment in individuals who were involved in sexual experiences as children and/or adolescents. This research attempted to remedy several deficits noted in previous studies by including males as well as females, by utilizing standardized measures to assess adjustment, and by including a comparison group of individuals without childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences. We reasoned that the impact of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences on subsequent adjustment would vary as a function of three sets of variables: (1) characteristics of the child and/or adolescent; (2) characteristics of the sexual experience itself (e.g., amount of force used, age difference between the child/adolescent and adult); and (3) the individual's cognitive interpretations of the sexual experiences. Thus, all three types of variables were examined as potentially important predictors of subsequent adjustment.

The recently revised learned helplessness model (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) was utilized in the present study as the basis for examining individual's cognitive interpretations of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences. This model proposes that an individual's response to uncontrollable events depends on the causal attribution the person makes concerning the event. These attributions are categorized into three independent dimensions: (1) internal-external (e.g., "It felt good physically and I 'participated', therefore I must have done something to cause the assault" versus "The offender was emotionally disturbed"); (2) stable-unstable (e.g., "I was molested because children are always exploited by adults in this world" versus "I was molested because I was unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time"); and (3) global-specific (e.g., "I was molested because the world is a terrible place" versus "The offender was a terrible person"). Attributing an

event to internal, stable, and/or global factors is hypothesized to produce greater deficits in coping responses and in subsequent adjustment (Silver & Wortman, 1980). In addition, participants were queried about their overall evaluative interpretation (positive-neutral-negative) of their experience.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was two-fold: (1) to explore the utility of the revised learned helplessness model as the basis for examining possible mediating effects of individual's cognitions about childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences on subsequent adjustment; and (2) to determine which personal characteristics, sexual experience characteristics, and cognitive interpretational variables regarding these experiences are most useful in predicting subsequent adjustment.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were volunteers from the undergraduate psychology research pool at the University of Georgia. They received research credits, which are part of their course requirements, in exchange for their participation. A total of 1,085 (595 females, 490 males) people were screened yielding 88 (63 females, 25 males) who reported that they had a childhood sexual experience, when they were under age 18, with someone who was older than they were by at least 5 years. Of these, 76 (59 females, 17 males) completed all materials (Childhood and/or Adolescent Sexual Experiences or CASE group).[1] A group of 76 comparison subjects, who reported that they did not have such childhood sexual experiences, matched for age, sex, race, marital status, socioeconomic status, and religion also completed all materials (non-CASE group). The modal subject was a 19 year old, single, white, Protestant female of middle to high SES.

Procedure

Subjects completed several standardized self-report measures assessing psychological, social/interpersonal, and sexual adjustment. The battery consisted of the Factor Analyzed Short Form of the California Psychological Inventory (FASF-CPI) (Burger, 1975), the Social Adjustment Scale by Self-Report (SAS-SR) (Weissman & Bothwell, 1976), and the Derogatis Sexual Functioning Inventory (DSFI) (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1979). In addition, subjects completed a final measure constructed by the first two authors. Some of the items were written by the first two authors; others were based on the questionnaires composed by Finkelhor (1979) and Atkeson, Calhoun, Resick, and Ellis (1982). This final measure requested information on demographics, aspects of the childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences, and asked questions regarding the individual's attributions concerning his/her experience (à la Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale's 1978 revised learned helplessness model) and his/her overall evaluative interpretation of the experiences (i.e., positive, neutral, or negative).

In order to examine differential adjustment in the CASE group members, the data were subjected to a stepwise discriminant function analysis. This procedure was used to predict "good" versus "poor" subsequent adjustment from personal characteristics, type of experience, and cognitive variables. A stepwise method was applied to the data which sequentially selects variables until they no longer contribute to the function's ability to discriminate between groups. This results in the optimal set of predictive variables being determined.

Initially, an "adjustment index" was developed in order to reflect the differential adjustment of the CASE group members. Previously, a Multivariate

Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) procedure had been performed on the data in order to empirically determine the effects of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences on subsequent adjustment. This analysis compared CASE group and nonCASE group members' scores on the various subscales of the three adjustment measures (FASF-CPI, SAS-SR, DSFI) and these results have been presented elsewhere (Seidner & Calhoun, 1984). Briefly, the MANOVA revealed a significant effect for Group Status (CASE versus nonCASE) and six subscales were found to significantly differ between these groups. These six subscales were as follows: (1) FASF-CPI Socialization, (2) FASF-CPI Self-acceptance, (3) DSFI Experiences, (4) DSFI Drive, (5) DSFI Attitudes, and (6) DSFI Fantasy. For the present study, these six subscales were standardized and summed for each CASE group member in order to compute their "adjustment index." The 76 individuals were then rank ordered by level of adjustment and divided equally into "good" and "poor" adjustment groups.

A number of variables were examined to determine their ability to discriminate between the CASE group members with "good" versus "poor" subsequent adjustment. Three main kinds of discriminating variables were utilized: Personal characteristics of the child/adolescent, aspects of the childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences, and the individual's cognitive interpretations of the experiences. These variables were as follows: I. Personal Characteristics: (a) gender, and (b) age at last incident (other demographic characteristics were not used as predictors due to limited range of variability in the sample). II. CASE (type of experience) Variables: (a) amount of force used, (b) degree of sexual contact, (c) degree of relationship between "victim" and "perpetrator", (d) frequency of incidents, (e) duration of experiences, (f) age difference between "victim" and "perpetrator," and (g) multiple experiences (i.e., experiences with more than one "perpetrator," not

within a single incident). III. Cognitive Variables: (1) Attributions: (a) Internal-External, (b) Global-Specific, (c) Stable-Unstable, and (2) Evaluation: Positive-Neutral-Negative.

Results

The results of the discriminant analysis (see Table 1) revealed that four variables combined to produce the optimal function for distinguishing CASE group members with "good" versus "poor" adjustment. These variables, in order of decreasing contribution to the function, were: (1) whether the individual made stable or unstable attributions about the causes of the experience; (2) whether the individual had experiences with a single or multiple "perpetrators"; (3) whether the CASE group member was male or female; and (4) the amount of force in the experience. Overall, a moderate proportion of the variance in the discriminant function is explained by the groups as indicated by the canonical correlation (.4949).

Further examination of the variables contributing to the function indicates that individuals who make more stable attributions regarding their experiences are more likely to fall into the poor adjustment group. Those who have had (an) experience(s) with more than one "perpetrator" are also more likely to be in the poor adjustment category. Male CASE group members were found to be more likely than females to fall into the poor adjustment group. Finally, a greater amount of force in the experience resulted in greater likelihood of poor adjustment group membership.

Following the discriminant analysis, a discriminant classification procedure was used to test the adequacy of the derived function. This procedure classifies the case used to derive the function originally and compares predicted group membership with actual group membership. The success of the

discrimination is empirically measured by observing the proportion of correct classifications. The results of this procedure may be found in Table 2. Overall, approximately 70% of the cases can be correctly classified utilizing the derived function.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that individuals who have had childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences exhibit considerable variability in subsequent adjustment. In the sample under consideration, a combination of personal characteristic, type of experience, and cognitive variables was found to be most predictive of the level of subsequent adjustment. That is, it appears that characteristics of the individual, the particular type of experience he/she has, and his/her cognitions regarding these events must all be considered when attempting to understand differential subsequent adjustment.

The variable having the greatest contribution to discriminating good from poor adjustment in the present sample was whether the individual's attributions about the experience(s) were stable or unstable. The results were consistent with the prediction one would make from Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale's (1978) revised learned helplessness model. That is, those individuals who made more stable attributions regarding the causes of their childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences (i.e. factor always present rather than only at that time) were found to have lower levels of subsequent adjustment.

The variable making the next greatest contribution was whether the individual had sexual experiences with single or multiple "perpetrators" (not within a single incident). Consistent with intuition, childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences with more than one "perpetrator" predicted "poor adjustment" group membership. Conceptually, the fact that such circumstances

would be more likely to lead individuals to make more stable attributions regarding the causes of their experiences seems clear and is in accordance with the finding that stable versus unstable attributions was the most predictive variable in the study.

The gender of the CASE group member was also useful in predicting good versus poor adjustment with males being more likely to fall in the poor adjustment group (Males 65% poor adjustment, 35% good adjustment. Females 44% poor adjustment, 56% good adjustment). This appears to be a particularly significant finding since it has often been noted that males are less likely than females to admit to distress. Also, the limited number of males in the sample indicates this must have been a rather powerful effect to have emerged in the function. The finding that males were more likely to fall into the poor adjustment group is inconsistent with the views of those who suggest that males are less likely than females to suffer negative consequences as a result of childhood sexual experiences (e.g., Herman & Hirschman, 1977; Pittman, 1977; Sloane & Karpinski, 1942). However, these results are consistent with more recent writings (e.g., Nasjleti, 1980; Sarrel & Masters, 1982) suggesting that the male's inability to protect himself from abuse is incongruent with his socialization which has stressed self-reliance thereby resulting in maladaptive cognitions and deficits in coping abilities.

Finally, consistent with most of the research to date (See Conte, 1984) individuals whose experiences involved more force were more likely to have poorer levels of subsequent adjustment. In combination, the four afore-mentioned variables appear to have moderately high ability to predict which individuals will have better or poorer adjustment subsequent to childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences. Future research is needed to determine what other variables may account for the remaining variability in sequelae.

The present study suggests that the revised learned helplessness model has potential utility as a model of the impact of one's cognitive interpretation of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences on subsequent adjustment. Thus, as would be predicted, those who made more stable attributions regarding the causes of their experience(s) were more likely to exhibit poor subsequent adjustment and this variable had the greatest predictive ability of the two personal characteristic, seven CASE and four cognitive variables examined. However, the global-specific and internal-external dimensions were not found to be useful predictors in the present study.

The results of the present research appear to have implications for the treatment of individuals who have had childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences. An individual's personal characteristics and type of experience cannot be changed. Yet, various cognitive-behavioral interventions exist that can alter cognitions. Thus, such interventions (e.g. directed at altering attributions) may be indicated as a means of preventing or ameliorating the detrimental effects of childhood and/or adolescent sexual experiences on subsequent adjustment.

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Footnotes

[1]Note: The criteria for inclusion in the CASE group were intentionally broad as we wanted to examine the effects of variations in types of experiences. Thus, some would be considered "abusive" while others might not.

Table 1

Discriminant Analysis Summary Table

STEP	VARIABLE ENTERED	WILKS' LAMBDA	SIG.
1	Attribution: Stable - Unstable	0.866681	0.0048
2	Multiple Experiences	0.797267	0.0020
3	Gender	0.774644	0.0030
4	Amount of Force	0.754991	0.0044

Table 2

Discriminant Classification Summary Table

ACTUAL GROUP MEMBERSHIP	NO. OF CASES	PREDICTED GROUP MEMBERSHIP GOOD ADJUSTMENT	POOR ADJUSTMENT
GOOD ADJUSTMENT	32	21 70.0%	9 30.0%
POOR ADJUSTMENT	31	9 29.0%	22 71.0%

PERCENT OF "GROUPED" CASES CORRECTLY CLASSIFIED: 70.49%